
IDEAS

The Idea That Whites Can't Refer to the N-Word

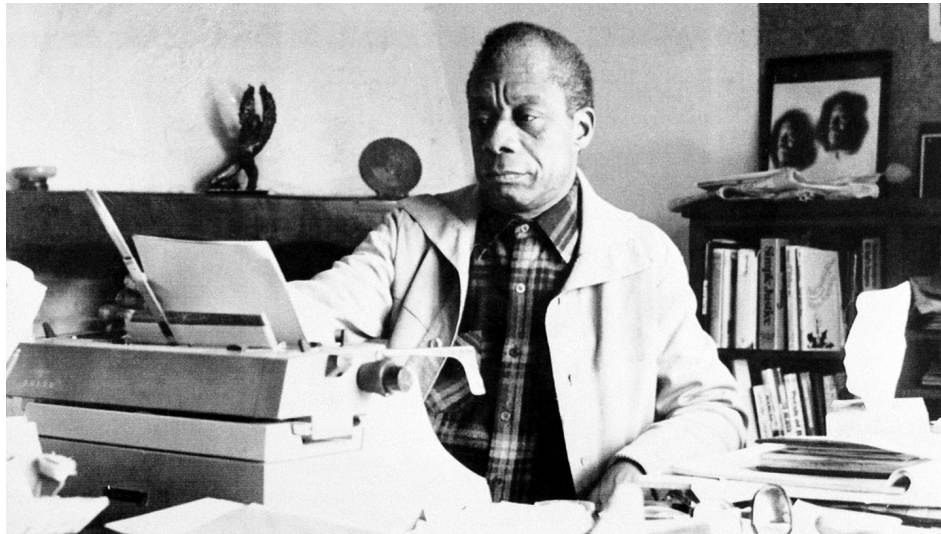
It's long been accepted that the slur shouldn't be used by white people to refer to black people. What about referring to the word itself?

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Laurie Shek is a professor of creative writing at the New School in New York, a decades-long veteran of the classroom, a widely published novelist and essayist, and a Pulitzer nominee. She's also spent the summer in trouble with her bosses for possibly being a racist.

Her offense? You may not have known that despite the resonance of the title of the renowned 2016 documentary on James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, Baldwin's [actual statement](#), during a [1963 appearance](#) on public television, was "I'm not a nigger." Early last spring semester, Shek, who is white, was teaching a graduate seminar on Baldwin, and one of the questions she posed for discussion was why the documentary title had substituted "Negro" for "nigger."

That's good teaching. She was evoking a word with one of the richest, nastiest, and most complex ranges of meaning in the English language. What did Baldwin mean by summoning it in 1963? Why, today, did the creators of that documentary substitute "Negro"? And having answered those questions, then we might examine the particular resonances of that word. The indifferent teacher asks things like "What did you think of the essay?" or "Does the essay reflect any of your personal experiences?" A special one tries to get the students into the head of the creator, into his times.

Shek was doing that—but in posing her question, she indeed used the word as Baldwin had, rather than euphemizing it as "the N-word."

A white student in the class objected to Sheck's having uttered the word. And administrators were apparently dissatisfied with Sheck's attempt to defend herself, because the school put her under investigation, while directing her to reacquaint herself with the school's rules about discrimination. This month the school determined that Sheck had committed no offense. But the fact that smart, busy people felt it necessary to investigate Sheck for mouthing the word when referring to it—not using it independently, much less directing it at someone—suggests a preoccupation less with matters of morality than with matters of taboo. Nor is Sheck's story one of a kind.

[*John McWhorter: 'Racist' is a tough little word*]

It's one thing to ban a word because it is a pitiless slur often used amid physical violence. That black people use it—and have forever—as a term of endearment among one another complicates matters somewhat, but whites who ask “Why can't we use it if they do?” have always struck me as disingenuous. It isn't rocket science to understand that words can have more than one meaning, and a sensible rule is that blacks can use the word but whites can't.

However, since the 1990s this rule has undergone mission creep, under which whites are not only not supposed to level the word as a slur, but are also not supposed to even refer to it. That idea has been entrenched for long enough now that it is coming to feel normal, but then normal is not always normal. It borders, as I suggested above, on taboo.

There are societies—such as many in Australia—in which it is forbidden to use ordinary language with in-laws, and this taboo is often extended even to referring to in-laws in conversation. Upon marrying, one must master a whole different vocabulary for talking to and/or about, for example, one's mother-in-law. Many are familiar with the click sounds in Xhosa. However, clicks didn't originate in Xhosa, but in lesser-known languages spoken by hunter-gatherers. Xhosa speakers, it is thought, adopted clicks from these other communities as part of an effort to create avoidance language, substituting them for ordinary sounds in Xhosa.

Practices like this sound neat to Americans—but also arbitrary. We understand that the practice is rooted in respect, but can't help thinking that the official practice has drifted somewhat beyond what logic would dictate. The idea that nonblacks cannot even soberly refer to the N-word verges on this kind of thing. Note the word *verges*: The N-word is a slur and loaded in a way that, say, asking your mother-in-law what she'd like for dinner is not; sparing usage and serious caution are warranted. Respect, nevertheless, has morphed into a kind of genuflection that an outsider might find difficult to understand.

That outsider could be an American time-traveler from as recently as the 1990s. Many of us still harbor a small collection of cassettes we just can't bear to chuck—mixtapes, toddlers telling stories, etc. One of mine is the first media interview I ever did, a radio talk-show episode on the N-word, in 1995. The host was white, the other guest was as well, and we had a discussion about the origins and current usage of that word, except that we used the real one.

The idea that we would euphemize the word as “the N-word” when we were talking about it rather than using it would not have occurred to any of us. It was a perfectly ordinary interview of the period. Sheck, who is in her 60s, was mature and working during this time and thus must remember when we were not so peculiarly uptight.

There are matters of art involved, of course. Even when discussing rather than wielding the word, people—including black ones—might avoid barking out the word any more than necessary. (Or avoid writing it more than necessary, as in this very essay.) Surely, its history means that it provokes negative associations; it doesn't sound good. Perhaps even the weird word *niggardly* ought to be let go. Accidentally, it just sounds too much like that other word to pass muster, especially when synonyms like *stingy* are so readily available. Those who use it should not be made to feel unfit for employment, as has actually happened. But it ought to be retired; in the same way, a German immigrant to America named Fahrt would discreetly change the name with all deliberate speed.

[*Read: Can educators ever teach the N-word?*]

But a white student so horrified at Sheck's uttering the N-word within the context of its usage by a black, crusading anti-racist figure such as James Baldwin that the student reports her to the authorities? It surely felt like Doing the Right Thing—but the problem is that when Spike Lee's film of (more or less) that title was playing in theaters, graduate students would have done no such thing.

Some will object that we moderns are more advanced than those '80s troglodytes, or at least that the discussion has progressed, enriched, that justice is being better served. And I am under no illusion that this is merely a matter of a certain kind of white performative wokeness. Quite a few black people, including authors of whole books on the word, would agree that Sheck should never utter that word at all for any reason.

We might ask, though, what the reason for a diktat like that is. It conveys, certainly, a kind of power. Inevitably, here and there a nonblack person will either use the word in an unsanctioned way or, just as often, be revealed to have done so in the past. If the word is sinful even when referred to, then the ground is especially fertile for black Americans or white allies to express outrage. Enter the Teaching Moment, when we are reminded of black people's plight in a racist nation, our history in savagery and dismissal, the power of even subliminal racist bias.

The question, though, is whether this is a healthy or even productive way of wielding strength. The air of grim aggrievement exhibits a certain superficial brand of gravity. Ultimately, however, it proposes a cry of weakness as strength: The properly black position is supposed to be, "If you even utter this word to refer to it, even in doing so to criticize it, you have gravely injured me." And white allies look on and commit themselves to decrying the supposedly wounding act. But I wonder how many black people, if given a bit of pause to examine that proposition, can truly say that they see this as a sign of a healthy racial self-image. Why not strength in achievements? After all, we have quite a few to point to.

Baldwin told America, "I'm not a nigger." I suspect that in Sheck's seminar it came out that the slur referred to someone inferior, and even exploitable. I am someone susceptible to having that word leveled at him. If I were angry with Sheck for uttering the word in a sympathetic and sensitive discussion, that would make me seem, in being so hypersensitive to injury so abstract, inferior indeed. Furthermore, if nonblacks embrace this hypersensitivity as a way of showing that they are good people, they make me feel exploited.

But I am not their, well, you know, either.

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